

## Analysis of Argumentation in Nam Cao's story *Chi Pheo* based on Pragmatics Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

The study of argumentation in a literary work of art is associated exclusively with a formal-logical (deductivist) perspective, according to which a good argument is the one which is deductively valid. The domain that aims at developing these knowledge and skills is termed as pragmatic logic (Ajdukiewicz, 2003). The applicability of pragmatic logic is quite controversial in analyzing and evaluating day to day arguments, particularly if these are applied in a realistic piece of writing, a short story, play or a novel. However, a pragmatic approach to reasoning and argumentation is the core concern of deductivism. It aims at the subject-matter, goals and methods of pragmatic logic. There are two arguments in this paper: first, there are a few crucial assumptions of pragmatic logic that harmonize with those accepted in argumentation theory; second, pragmatic logic is a legitimate tool in the study of argumentation. Nam Cao's *Chi Pheo* is a story about farmers' plight and brutal oppression of the feudal colonial society in the period before August Revolution. This study has collected instances of argumentation with pragmatic perspectives in the short story *Chi Pheo* with a view to analyze deductivism in its plot, characterization, motifs and such other attributes. The goal of this paper is to explain informally and give a taste of the scope that a novel or a short story might cover in order to adopt a Pragmatic approach to prove or disprove an argument

**Keywords:** *pragmatics, deductivism, argumentation, Vietnam prose,*

### INTRODUCTION

The word argument comes from the Latin word *argumentum*, which means "evidence, ground, support, proof; a logical argument." Thus, the idea of argument does not originally carry the negative connotations of quarrel and dissent as it is naturally understood; in the domain of logic, it is just a manner of presenting evidence. With a pragmatic perspective, argumentation is defined as a systematic investigation of implementing language and methods of logic and creating what is called logical culture (Luong, 1990). The domain that aims at developing these knowledge and skills is termed as pragmatic logic (Ajdukiewicz, 1967; Ajdukiewicz, 2003). The study of argumentation is associated exclusively with a formal-logical (deductivist) perspective, according to which a good argument is the one which is deductively valid. The applicability of formal logic or formal deductive logic (FDL) (Blair & Johnson, 1987a; Blair & Johnson, 1987b; Johnson, 2014; Van Eemeren et al, 2013) is quite controversial in analyzing and evaluating day to day arguments, particularly if these are applied in a realistic piece of writing, a short story, play or a novel.

In pragmatism, a logical deductive perspective provides criteria that allow us to distinguish good from bad reasoning, and valid from invalid inference. Deductivism is thus a domain that explains how good reasoning is minimally a valid inference (Jacquette 2009). Deductivism, however deals not only with reasoning, but also with broader 'logical' norms of defining, questioning or ordering (Jacquette 2009; Marciszewski 2009). A pragmatic approach to reasoning and argumentation is the core concern of deductivism. When it applies to a literary work, a novel or a short story, it aims at the subject-matter, goals and methods of pragmatic logic. There are two arguments in this paper: first, there are a few crucial assumptions of pragmatic logic that harmonize with those accepted in argumentation theory; second, pragmatic logic is a legitimate tool in the study of argumentation.

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Nam Cao's short story *Chi Pheo*, originally called *The Old Brick Oven* and *Couples deserve it* before the book was published in 1941, is heavily studded with argumentation where evidence is presented with reasoning and logic exclusively with formal-logical (deductivist) perspective. Without any exception, readers can analyze and distinguish between good and bad arguments commonly associated with deductivism. There are mainly two themes of this highly realistic story: poor intellectuals and poor farmers. Nam Cao makes a tragic description of both themes through his characters that are in a state of alienation, all because of very trivial things like a piece of rice, or drinking water or a cup of wine. They are suffering oppression and devastating alienation by the brutal feudal society. *Chi Pheo* depicts the pre-1945 rural Vietnam in a profoundly and a most humanitarian manner. The ultimate objective of the story lies in the argument and where deductivism is drawn is to accept the criticism of ancient feudal society and appreciate the good and noble qualities of Vietnamese farmers. This makes the story deeply philosophical.

Awarded with, Ho Chi Minh Prize for literature and arts, Nam Cao (1917-1951) belonged to a poor peasant family, who opted to work as a journalist, participated in revolutionary activities and after the August Revolution was acclaimed as a Revolutionary writer. The period of 1941 - 1944 was the most prolific period for Nam Cao's writing which represented a blend of social and literary thinking. In an experimental Vietnamese prose, expressed fictionally in a profoundly realistic manner, he chose countryside as a setting for his stories to depict the realistic picture of the lives of the Vietnamese people with all their trauma, pain and horror. Amidst their tragic and alienated existence, the argument emerges from his stories is farmers' desire to live peacefully with their families. When they are not able to do so, there is a strong resistance.

The pragmatics perspective of Nam Cao's artistic works lies in his dexterous use of language to depict diverse situations. An example of pragmatics in the short story *Chi Pheo* is seen in the manner characters react to different situations. Since pragmatics is the study of 'meaning' in language in a particular context, the setting or the place where the language is spoken is very important. The pragmatic approach allows the reader to understand what they speak and what they mean in a particular context. Moreover, Pragmatics also enables the exchange of implicit messages via explicit messages (e.g., linguistic messages understood semantically). Pragmatically speaking, the writer of a text encodes an implicit message which is decoded by readers as the explicit message in order to understand it. Such a decoding, it is suggested, requires support from informational resources embedded in the context. Hence, Nam Cao in his short story *Chi Pheo* communicates the implicit message through such attributes like the title, motifs, structure, plot and characterization. To understand this implicit message, it requires readers to delve deep into each of these aspects and generate the explicit message from their context. More specifically, the context is the concern or motif that motivates a writer to create a work of art and Nam Cao is not an exception.

Nam Cao's motif or concern was to express the truth, the misery of the farmers in a feudalistic society. Therefore, he chose his content from the tragedy of the people, manifested in their suffering. He also chose to describe the poor and helpless intellectuals in a period of revolution, living a worn life, choosing to show resistance. Hence, the misery of both farmers and intellectuals become the motif of Nam Cao's writings, which gets oriented towards spiritualism as well as practical aspects simultaneously. He writes about small and mediocre things but raises social problems, profound human philosophies and progressive artistic perspectives.

This study aims to collect instances of argumentation with pragmatic perspectives in Nam Cao's short story *Chi Pheo* with a view to analyze deductivism in its plot, characterization, motifs and such other attributes. The goal of this paper is to explain informally and give a taste of the scope that a novel or a short story might cover in order to adopt a Pragmatic approach to prove or disprove an argument.

**ARGUMENTATION**

An argument in a story as a piece of art takes a course of logical and emotional reasoning. The author pragmatically argues that a particular approach is either good or bad. The argument is author's ultimate motif, to reveal some truth and convey some meaning to readers. This is true of Nam Cao's *Chi Pheo* where he argues about a social cause in such a way that it leaves little for readers to reject or refute (Cao, 2013; hanam.gov.vn, 2019). With the help of several verbal and non-verbal messages and conflicts between characters acting as pragmatic perspectives, Nam Cao succeeds in communicating his real intention (Luong, 1990). These perspectives, taking the form of logical (deductivist) perspectives, help readers to decide whether a particular argument is deductively valid or not. When it happens, there is no point of departure and the application of formal deductive logic (Blair & Johnson, 1987a; Blair & Johnson, 1987b; Johnson, 2014; Van Eemeren et al, 2013) becomes apparent.

This section attempts to investigate how various aspects like title, prototypes motifs, structure plot and characterization convey the argumentation manifest in the short story under study. This section also presents a few argumentative patterns that reflect the premises and conclusion used in the texture of the story.

*i. Title: What's in a name?*

The original title of the story, *Old brick kiln*, draws attention to the damnation and the curse that surrounds the farmers. There is a class subjugated to the fire or wrath of the feudal class like in a brick kiln. This shows the inevitability of the exploitation in a society run by old values, traditions and customs, all of which are favorable to the upper feudal class. Moreover, since this was the first title of the story, it signifies the birth of the protagonist, Chi Pheo, who does not enjoy any human right to life.

The second title of this story speculated by its publishers New Life Publishing House (Hanoi) was *Couples deserve a match*. This title was selected arbitrarily in order to draw attention of the readers to the love between Thi No and Chi Pheo, and at the same time contrast that love with the cruelty of Vu Dai and Ba Kien. This title was suitable for readers of a particular taste and class, but the broad argument of social exploitation, alienation of the poor and the intellectuals got overshadowed by the love between Thi and Chi or by the villainous role of Ba Kien. Both the titles were dropped as they failed to convey the real intention of the writer. Finally, Nam Cao decided to call the story *Chi Pheo* after the protagonist of the story. This title carried the values of peasants profoundly represented in Chi Pheo whose destiny and fate are the only real and human values in an unreal and alienated society. Moreover, this title also represented the pragmatic logic of deducting meaning from the action of the story.

*ii. The story as a prototype*

In order to make his argument plausible, Nam Cao makes use of prototypes – both in setting and building his characters. The village where the story is set is built upon Dai Hoang village of the Hoa Hau commune in Ly Nhan district, Ha Nam province. As for the three main characters Chi Pheo, Thi No and Ba Kien, they were characterized on villagers who lived in Dai Hoang village until their old age. There was a villager also named as Chi, who slaughtered pigs not for money but to help people. When drunken, often he would stagger in the village streets and people would shun him by saying "go pheo," that is, go to sleep. Hence, he came to be known as Chi Pheo. There were two other villagers distinctly akin to Chi Pheo's character, one of whom even cursed villagers in drunken state and was jailed. It seems Nam Cao was familiar with these characters when he conceived his protagonist.

Likewise, the character of Thi No was built upon a woman Tran Thi No, who the writer called his aunt. The character of Ba Kien was built upon a villager who specialized in building rice mill, who was ugly in appearance, and a crazy heartless personality. He was still alive after the August revolution.

Nam Cao made use of these prototypes for his characterization which offered both plausibility and credibility to his short stories. Many of his short stories were seen as a model for this genre as eventually some of his characters

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became typical figures, full of life. Chi Pheo became a household name, a revolutionary figure. People referred to his name as a fierce person, not controlled by reason. In everyday language the word Chi Pheo came to be used both as noun and an adjective, often used to describe a person who likes to eat pigs, who is rough and drinks alcohol, having characteristics similar to the character Chi Pheo in the story.

Nam Cao's linguistic approach is quite visible through such prototypical characters (Cao, 2013; hanam.gov.vn, 2019). For example: the manner in which Chi swears, the description of Chi's mood after his meeting with Thi No and his reaction when she rejects his love and last, but not the least, the conversation with Ba Kien are narrative specimens of Nam Cao's contribution to modern Vietnamese prose (Luong,1990). Nam Cao narrates by making a harmonious combination of dialogue and monologue, between indirect and semi-direct words. Therefore, many paragraphs have a mix of narrator language and character language. The readers find a typical rhetorical tone which makes this story both argumentative and logically didactic in the real sense of these terms.

### *iii. Society Vs Individual*

*Chi Pheo* is a traumatic and obsessive description of an unjust feudal society, full of crimes and injustices and of impoverished farmers. Before the August Revolution in Vietnam, the story shows how the society can destroy the spiritually of an individual; destroying human nature and denying human rights. The short story reflects the intense and typical conflicts between the ruling class and the peasants. There are individuals like Chi Pheo who have lost their personalities, honesty and the human spirit. When Chi Pheo returns from the prison, he has been transformed into a slit-stripper who destroys families in Vu Dai village. He becomes a threat to the society because of his hideous face and brutal actions.

Likewise, Nam Cao's argument goes on and he apprehends that every character shall reach this level of dehumanization and resort to brutal path, thus getting alienated from the society. Pragmatically, such an apprehension is valid as pre-revolution society in Vietnam suffered from deep psychological trauma and humiliation. The society was full of ugly, rude and problematic characters. Like Chi Pheo, there are several characters that are pushed out of human society and forced to live a painful life like an animal.

Now let us analyze what led to such a derogatory decline of Chi Pheo, who transformed from a healthy, honest farming man to an evil, brutal murderer. Chi Pheo had a very unfortunate childhood, lived an abandoned life in an old brick kiln, under the care and support of kind and gentle villagers. However, when he grew up and went to work, he encountered people like Ba Kien who pushed him into evil and brutal activities, alienating him from the good people of the society and ending this path of alienation in a prison.

After seven or eight years of imprisonment, when Chi Pheo returns to the village, he is completely transformed into a devil figure:

"The head is bare, the teeth were shaved white, the face was black but very muscular, the eyes were glaring." With a shaven head, blackened face and disgusting eyes, he is no longer "good". He has adopted such mannerisms e "banging his head, slitting his face, almost killing him while drunk. [...] He smashed so many peaceful scenes, made the blood and tears of so many honest people [...] he eat while drunk, sleep while drunk, [...]drunkenness spilled from one attack to another into enormous bouts"

He was never awake to be aware of what he was doing. Once in the drunken state, he went to Ba Kien's house to take revenge and murdered him and ended his own life. Before his death, he shouted: "I want to be an honest person (...) Can not! Who gave me honest? How do you lose the bottles on this side? I cannot be a good guy anymore. Know it!" The final words reveal the tragic drama of farmers in an unjust society. He also articulated a series of

"curses". "He cursed the sky, he cursed the land, and he cursed the whole Vu Dai village. He cursed the one who gave birth to him ..."

This is the rhetoric that has engrossed the minds of readers. The logical state of mind on one hand accepts the injustice done to Chi Pheo and holds the society, fate or destiny responsible for this tragedy. This argument holds good because Chi Pheo was an honest farmer but was pressured and trampled by society, and was pushed to the path of a murderer. It was Ba Kien with an evil face that was responsible for this decline. Ba Kien represents the ruling class. He is cruel, knows how to exploit and deceive farmers, how to tear them apart, and make them harm one another. As an alienated individual or a member of a society already tortured by the feudal lords, Chi Pheo cannot oppose the feudal brutal forces like any other member of the Vu Dai village. This is the second facet of this argument wherein society deprives the individuals of their dreams, of honest life, and turns them into criminals. And when their conscience awakens, they have no choice except to end their life. As there is no path to return to the honest life, Chi Pheo thus represents all such tortured and alienated individuals.

*iv. Argument in the motifs or theme*

The argument or motif of Milton's *Paradise Lost* was seen when Milton stated the reasons why man was thrown out of Eden, what were the reasons for all his "woes," and how "one greater Man" (Jesus Christ) would restore humanity. The rest of the epic and its sequel only developed this argument – to "justify the ways of God to men." Milton validated the motif or purpose of his epic poem which the readers understood by applying deductive logic. Deductivism as stated earlier depends upon good reasoning and depends much on valid inference (Jacquette, 2009). In interpreting a piece of literature, readers thus apply deductivism, not only for confining it to reasoning but also to the 'logical' norms of defining, questioning or ordering.

Nam Cao too has generalized a social phenomenon that prevailed in rural Vietnam before 1945. He argues in *Chi Pheo* how peasants or labor workers are subjected to alienation and vulgarization. Let us understand through argumentative patterns: Ba Kien is a bad man, not only bad with Chi Pheo but also other people, such as Nam Tho. Nam Tho came to Ba Kien house to threaten him and hope Ba Kien will let Nam Tho go far away. Nam Tho used various reasons to persuade Ba Kien:

*He said: follow him, he will go away forever (reason), if don't follow him, he will kill by a knife (reason), then he does not care anything; (reason) if want to live with wife and children (reason) Mr. Ly must meet his demand. (Conclusion)*

This can be separated into argumentation patterns:

**Argumentation 1:** *follow him (meet his demand) (reason) he goes away forever (conclusion)*  
**Argumentation 2:** *If don't follow him (reason) he will kill (conclusion)*  
**Argumentation 3:** *If want to live (reason) must follow him (meet his demand) (conclusion)*

Nam Tho thus used argumentation with several reasons to threaten Ba Kien. Although he threatens Ba Kien by many reasons but his target is to persuade Ba Kien to meet his demand.

In another argument, Chi Pheo is shown crazy and unreasonable, insane after imprisonment. He curses and dares all people he meets in the village:

*Angry, he swears at all Vu Dai village. (reason) But all Vu Dai village, all people are thinking: "He may except me". (reason) No one talks anything (conclusion)*





Following the reconstruction of the argumentation pattern in this statement:

**(1) First syllogism:**

**Major Premise:** One who has backache, is normally afraid of his wife

**Minor Premise:** Ba Kien has backache

**Conclusion:** Ba Kien is afraid of his wife

**(2) Second syllogism:**

**Major Premise:** One, who is always afraid of his wife, feels strongly jealous

**Minor Premise:** Ba Kien is afraid of his third wife

**Conclusion:** Ba Kien is strongly jealous

In the first syllogism, major premise mentions the general rule that one who has backache will not have enough ability to meet his wife's sexual demand so that, he must be afraid of his wife. The minor premise shows the fact that Ba Kien has backache and it directs us to the conclusion where Ba Kien is afraid of his wife. There is a question why Ba Kien had backache? Probably because of his old age or may be because his wife is young with too strong sexual demands and Ba Kien cannot meet his wife's demands, so he got backache.

Similarly, the second syllogism has major premise which mentions the general rule that one who is afraid of his wife normally feels strongly jealous. Since Ba Kien is always afraid of his wife, it concludes that Ba Kien will feel strongly jealous.

In a literary text, when an author creates such a dilemma for the reader, it is deductivism which gives the answer. Deductivism in literature clearly states that behind every rationale in the plot of a story or its characterization, logic is at least a matter of deductively valid inference (Jacquette 2009). Logical deductivism not only deals with reasoning, but also with broader 'logical' norms of defining, questioning or ordering" (Jacquette 2009). Nam Cao therefore leaves a wider scope in the story for questioning its events and actions committed by characters and demonstrating them in argumentative patterns showing premises and conclusions.

**Syntactic Argumentation**

A similar argumentative pattern to study a text like *Chi Pheo* is syntactic argumentation though not very common in Vietnamese prose, but it cannot escape a lexico-vigilant linguist who sees examples of words setting an argumentative pattern. Though these words are the translated versions into English language, suffice it is to say that they can be examined and analyzed in a separate study to set up categories or word classes. For instance, the English version of the story runs thus the description of Chi Pheo:

One fine *misty* morning when he saw him *naked* and *gray* in a *battered* dress by an *abandoned* brick kiln, he picked it up and brought it to a *blind* widow. This blind widow sold him to a *childless* assistant and when the assistant was dead, he was *helpless*, leaving for one house and another.

The choice of such words like *misty*, *abandoned*, *naked*, *blind* and *childless* are syntactically similar and formulate an argument of some kind of generalizations regarding the meaning and plot of the story.

Such syntactic argumentation also provides a structural unity to the author's argument, from beginning to the end. For instance:

*Prologue : the Brick Oven --*

*One of the men went to drop the eel, one fine misty morning when he was naked and graying a battered dress by an abandoned brick kiln, he picked it up and brought it back to a blind widow.*

*Finish : the Brick Oven –*

*Suddenly Thi saw a glimpse of an empty brick kiln, away from home and deserted people coming back ..*

The “Brick Oven” is mentioned both at the beginning and at the end of the story. This oven is described as *abandoned* in the beginning and *empty* in the last scene. This has serious implications, maybe Nam Cao is comparing brick kiln to a peasant’s life which is as abandoned and empty as the brick oven. Let us look at this through Chi Pheo’s life which also passes through stages as a brick in an oven.

Nam Cao divides Chi Pheo’s life into 3 stages: the first stage describes him as an ordinary farmer, honest and hardworking, naïve and a simple peasant. But he is pushed into the jail by Ba Kien due to jealousy. The second stage of his life saw Chí Phèo as a henchman, a vicious monster, who is constantly drunk and who dictates upon the innocent people of Vu Dai village, who were so oppressed already that they could not help him reform. However, in the third stage, a change is seen in Chi Pheo due to his love for Thi which awakened the humanity in him. He tried to return to natural self, but suddenly he was swayed by the feeling of taking revenge with the person who had put him in the jail. He stabbed Ba Kien to death and ended his own life. The three stages are just an essence of poor farmers and their alienation, which were not a part of the mainstream society and have no choice to end their life gloomily.

No argument here can justify the fate of farmers like Chi Pheo, nor are there any logical statements to refute Nam Cao’s grievous accusation about the brutal, rotten society that plunges poor and honest people into alienation and vulgarization. However, the argumentation theory would accept the farmers’ plight and their alienation as everyday arguments that can be associated with deductivism. There are implied criteria in deductivism which allow readers to distinguish between good and bad reasoning. Hence, Chi Pheo’s story as structured is deductively valid. It is true that a brutal society will never allow people to live kindly, and continue to push honest people into the path of sin. This statement is validated by Chi Pheo’s plight and the tragic end.

#### **THE ENDNOTE: POSITIVE ARGUMENTATION**

Literature in any form, a short story, a novel or a poem, entertains readers; though this is not its ultimate motif. Literature is also seen as a powerful tool in hands of the writer to reshape the thinking of readers. Arguments are seen in action when writers play with words, ideas and ideologies, point of view and persuade readers to accept or reject what they present. In this short story, *Chi Pheo*, Nam Cao has created several layers of argumentation: from humanitarian values to hatred and cruelty, from pangs of the unfortunate people to pleasures of the feudal class; from right to be human and honest to act in a dehumanized manner; the right to live happily in a society to push the same society into pain and misery. Such a dichotomy and juxtaposition of arguments are presented in *Chi Pheo* which portrays the anarchist culture of the Vu Dai villagers, the annihilation of Chi’s honesty and turning him rebellious.

In the course of studying these arguments, readers feel the intolerance of Chi Pheo in the form of protest, leading to fatalities, brutalities, murders and suicide. Though the act of killing Ba Kien and committing suicide is a fierce and drastic act but it was an unexpected act. Nam Cao can be criticized of violating the pragmatic perspectives of logical deductivism. There are reasons to allege the writer for such discrepancies. First, there were clear indications of positive change coming in Chi Pheo after Thi No shows her care and sincere love for Chi Pheo. Second, there was a warm bowl of onion porridge from the town of Bloom for Chi Pheo, which awakened the human in him. He was surprised, with tears in his eyes he ate porridge honestly and expressed the desire to build a family and make peace with Vu Dai villagers. But on the very next morning, Chi Pheo gets drunk again, takes the knife and killed Ba Kien

and himself. It seems Nam Cao's motif was to highlight the hope, the positivism which he discovered as a quality among villages and poor farmers who can turn humans once again even if they thought that they had completely lost their humanity

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